

Part 1

Comparative Education & History of Education

CHARL WOLHUTER

ALSO A DOOR TO THE INSIDE OF A NEW HOUSE — YET ANOTHER USE FOR COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

Abstract

The author has been involved in cross-national research regarding the motivations of students for studying Comparative Education. A wide variety of motivations were identified, depending on national context. This paper begins by summarizing those findings. On a recent bout as guest professor teaching Comparative Education at a Canadian university, yet another interesting employment of Comparative Education was discovered, namely that of introducing international students (from an extra-Western context) to Western education and its philosophical superstructure and the exigencies of studying at a Western university; thus preparing these students for studying at a North American university. This paper reports on that experience.

Research on the use of Comparative Education

Comparative Education has been typified as an “eclectic/diverse field with adjustable borders and contours which are difficult to demarcate” (Epstein & Carroll, 2005: 62), and as a constantly broadening field (Wolhuter, 2008: 340) — crossing new borders, entering new frontiers and opening new vistas. One of the question with which theoreticians of the field occupies themselves is with the significance or utility of the field (*cf.* King, 1965; Larsen, ed., 2010; Manzon, 2011: 174-177; Wolhuter, 2011: 36-48). To be meaningful as taught to students, this question needs to be constantly addressed, especially from the view or experience of students. Therefore, under the aegis of the thematic session of the teaching of Comparative Education (later superseded by the thematic session of Comparative Education as university discipline, as this thematic session is currently known) in the International Conference of Comparative Education and Teacher Training, the comparative study of the meaning and relevance of Comparative Education for students in various national settings developed as a central research project.

A comparative project involving nine countries on five continents, culminating in an article published in the journal *Educational Research* (Wolhuter *et al.*, 2011) identified a host of diverse reasons as to why students in various national contexts would want to study Comparative Education, depicting a picture of a dynamic, pliable, ever-rejuvenating field.

In the case of the United States of America, the dominant motive for enrolling in Comparative Education courses are related to international understanding within the context of education as part of international aid. The hierarchy of expectations of the American students might be understood against the background of these students' experience and career plans in international aid. American student expectations may also result from the amount of foreign aid (and education as part thereof) that the United States of America has been engaged in the past half century, ever since the advent of independence of large parts of the Third World, The Cold War, and the Truman Doctrine. In the case of Ireland the most important motivation was to help students to find a job to teach abroad. The Irish student teachers were mainly in there early twenties and intended to teach abroad at some stage of their career. They also indicated that they hoped it would develop their capacities to teach in the newly developing multi-cultural classrooms in Ireland and to also develop their general teaching strategies. The Greek and South African students looked to Comparative Education to illuminate and to guide the domestic education reform project. Both Greece and South Africa has recently become the scene of fundamental societal reconstruction, of which education is not only an integral part, but in which education had been assigned a pivotal instrumental role to bring about. Bulgarian students' expectations, on the other hand, seem to resolve around gaining of fuller knowledge and insight of their own education system. While undergoing societal and educational transformation as South Africa, Bulgaria as a fully fledged member of the erstwhile Eastern Block, never suffered from academic isolation as South Africa did during the years of the international academic boycott. But the existence of an intransparent government and political-bureaucratic machinery up to 1990 might have created a yearning to know and to understand their education system better. In contrast to South Africa, Tanzania has long since passed through the post-independence educational and societal reconstruction of the 1960s – a project that bore limited success, and whatever educational reform is currently taking place, takes place within the prescribed fixed parameters of the World Bank Structural Adjustment Programme (which Tanzania had little option but to sign) and the neo-liberal global economic revolution. Tanzanian students therefore have a somewhat more detached (from everyday practice), purely intellectual expectation from Comparative Education courses. Oman has recently commenced to develop a mass education system, therefore Omani students, as their South African and Greek counterparts are interested in the value of Comparative Education to illuminate and to guide domestic educational reform. A unique expectation which transpired among the responses of the Omani students, is that, in a country with one public university, and 5097 students studying abroad (total tertiary enrolment 68154), Comparative Education will be seen a means to obtain knowledge of foreign education systems, which will facilitate students to proceed to further (post-graduate) studies abroad. Similarly, among the Thai post-graduate cohort, an interesting expectation was what would assist them in finding an appropriate research design for their theses. Cuban students viewed Comparative Education as a way to gain a fuller understanding of various countries' societies and cultures. Cuban students' expectations could have been shaped by their country's history of using education to create a new society and culture since 1961 (*cf.* Arnove, 1982). They view Comparative Education as revealing how their own as well as other societies and cultures were shaped by

education, and how education contributes to the accomplishment of societal goals, such as societal justice.

The author, who coordinated the above research project, thought that the range of motivations and uses of Comparative Education which emanated from the research exhausted all the possibilities of the uses of the field. Being visiting professor at Brock University, Canada, for the winter semester (January-April) 2012, however, brought yet another relevance of Comparative Education to the fore. The author lectured the course: EDUC 5P21: Comparative Education and International Education. This course is limited to international students. Students mainly from Mainland China, but also some from elsewhere in Eastern Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and Africa study this course as a compulsory part of their Masters in Education in Educational Leadership Programme. The entire course EDUC 5P21 is built around Western and Chinese ways of thought, of knowledge acquisition and the Western and Chinese views on knowledge. In this regard the course is reminiscent of a precedent in Comparative Education, namely Joseph Lauwerys' plea for a philosophical approach to Comparative Education, set out in his article of 1959 (Lauwerys, 1959). The two textbooks of the EDUC 5P21 course are:

1. R.E.Nisbett. 2003. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently...and why*. New York: The Free Press.
2. S.B. Merriam. 2007. *Non-Western Perspectives on Learning and Knowing*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company.

Other courses in the students' programme are: Foundations of Education, Organisation Theory, Research Methodology, School Observation (practicum) and Change Theory. It is obvious that this course in Comparative and International Education serves as an induction for students into Western education, learning styles and epistemology valued in the West, and the exigencies and the philosophical underpinning of Western education. It is clear that the cultural and educational background of these students (Confucian and Maoist, albeit a somewhat modernized/modified form thereof) ill-prepare these students for study at a North American university, and Comparative Education serves as the bridging course. Nisbett (2003) makes a well substantiated case that Western and East Asian cultures differ in their metaphysics, or fundamental beliefs in the nature of the world. Whereas Westerns tend to see change in a linear way, Asians, influenced by the Tao, tend to have an eternal cyclic view of change. Aristotle and Confucius presented two different systems of thought, which laid the basis for respectively the Western and the East Asian conceptualization of the world. For example, whereas Westerners views of the world and their thought processes are heavily influenced by the search for individual identity (essentialism) of objects in the world and approach the world in an analytical mode of thought, East Asians tend to view the world more holistically, placing emphasis on relationships rather than individual identity. Second, their characteristic thought patterns differ, influenced by their respective metaphysical beliefs. Then people use the cognitive tolls to make sense, to attach meaning in the world in which they live in. All these are interrelated with people's attitudes and beliefs, values and preferences. Some of the many other differences between Western and Eastern ways of perceiving the world, as highlighted by Nisbett (2003) include:

- Patterns of attention and perception, with Westerners attending more to objects and Easterners attending more likely to detect relationships among events than Westerners.

- Beliefs about the controllability of the environment, with Westerners believing in controllability more than Easterners.

- Preferred patterns of explanation for events, with Westerners focusing on objects and Easterners more likely to emphasise relationships.

- Habits of organizing the world, with Westerners preferring categories and Easterners being more likely to emphasise relationships.

- Application of dialectical approaches, with Easterners being more inclined to seek the Middle Way when confronted with apparent contradictions and Westerners – under the influence of Aristotlean logic – being more inclined to insist on the correctness of one belief vs. another.

- Debate is almost unknown in Eastern Asia. Negotiation and conflict resolution have different characters in the harmony striving East than in Western Europe.

- For East Asians the world is an interdependent world in which the self is part of a larger whole; Westerners live in a world in which the self is a unitary free agent.

All these have implications with the way people learn (Merriam, 2007: 183) and how they approach an education situation. The Confucian and Mao (or then modernized Mao) cultural background taught East Asians the message that education is teacher centred (*cf.* Merriam, 2007: 185), in vivid contrast to the contemporary Western idea of education as student centred. The Confucian and Maoist idea of education being knowledge handed down by the teacher to be absorbed by the student, the latter not suppose to critically question such sanctified handed down knowledge, is the opposite of the value placed by contemporary Western education upon independent and critical thinking. Merely regurgitating what appears in the literature is condemned in the West as plagiarism. Memorisation plays a much larger and more valued role in Eastern Asian education than in the West (although a number of scholars, such as Biggs, 1996, has cautioned against the distortedly naïve representation of this phenomenon, ie this aspect of East Asian learning, in Western scholarly literature). Nisbett (2003: 74-75) writes: “It is not uncommon for American professors to be impressed by their hard-working, highly selected Asian students and then be disappointed by their first major paper – because of their lack of mastery of the rhetoric common in the professor’s field.”

The course EDUC5P21 at Brock University culminates in

1. the following mid-term assignment:

Students will work in groups of two and have an informal interview /conversation with one male, and one female student at Brock University who has been educated in Canada. The purpose of this assignment is for students to synthesis the theoretical concepts they are learning in class through an experiential learning exercise. This assignment should be 5 pages long.

2. the following final assignment

For this assignment students will write an 8 page paper on the following topic:

Both author of one of your textbooks (Nisbett in the final chapter of his book) and editor of the other textbook (Merriam in her first chapter) express the wish that in future there will be a synthesis of mentalities, of ways of knowing;

enriching for both individual and for society. Imagine you have been appointed principal of a school, steeped in the Western rational tradition, but with an increasingly global student corps. You wish to imbue the school with other perspectives of learning and knowing. How would you go about doing that, i.e. how would you motivate your desire to parents, teachers and school governing bodies; and how would you change the ethos, institutional culture and curricula of the school?

It has been stated that one of the aims of Comparative Education is to serve the purposes of multicultural education, or intercultural education. Recommendably so, although usually what is meant is that Comparative Education will sensitize teachers to the needs, experience and culture of children from cultural descent other than that of the teacher (e.g. Planel, 2008). However the meteoric rise of the international student body, in times of globalization, of the European Union (and ERASMUS and ERASMUS Mundus) places this exercise of Brock University and the relevance of Comparative Education in an entirely new light. The number of international students worldwide has increased from two million in 2000 to 3.3 million in 2009 (UNESCO, 2011), while one projection places the number on 7.2 million by 2025 (Altbach *et al.*, 2009: 25). Furthermore with the increasingly mobile world population (in 2000 175 million people in the world, or one out of every 35, were international migrants — up from 7.9 million in 1960), the potential for Comparative Education with respect to international primary and secondary school students is ever-increasing. Here a new vista is opening for Comparative Education and its value in teacher education and graduate Education programmes.

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Prof. Dr. Charl Wolhuter
Comparative Education professor
North-West University
Potchefstroom Campus
South Africa
Charl.Wolhuter@nwu.ac.za